

Women's History Month
California Women Pioneering the Future
By Senator Liz Figueroa

A few years ago the Women's Caucus, at that time chaired by Senator Bowen (D-Marina Del Ray), sent a letter to Legislators regarding an event celebrating California women. At the bottom of the letter were listed staff contacts Ms. Susan B. Anthony and Ms. Elizabeth Caty Stanton. We assumed that our colleagues would recognize the names of the famous late nineteenth century women's rights activists. The number of phone calls our offices received actually asking to speak with Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton is a prime example of why we need to continue to celebrate "Women's History Month."

This month, I've introduced Senate Concurrent Resolution 13, to proclaim March as "Women's History Month." Women have played an important role in every step of our history, but unfortunately the historical accomplishments of women are often overlooked, by celebrating "Women's History Month," we provide schools an opportunity to emphasize the impact women have made to our history.

Many readers have probably never heard the story of Mary Ellen Pleasant, who in 1864 sued and won when the San Francisco Streetcar Company refused to allow African Americans to ride. Or Kate Kennedy, a San Francisco educator, who in 1874 successfully lobbied the Legislature to provide equal pay for female and male teachers in California. Female lawyers of today owe thanks to Clara Shortridge Foltz, who in 1878, with fellow suffragist Laura deForce Gordon, drafted the Women's Lawyer Bill, to allow women to practice law in California.

In 1911 California became the 6th state to grant women the right to vote in, but it is important to recognize that the battle for women's suffrage began years before. In fact, a ballot proposition that would have granted women the right to vote failed passage in 1886, even after Susan B. Anthony spent 8 months in California campaigning.

Today, with 36 women elected to the California State Legislature, women compromise only 30% of the 120-member Legislature, and currently, there is not a single woman holding a statewide office. While both U.S. Senators from California are women, female leaders hold only 18 of the 53 seats in the House of Representatives. We must change this! We have a responsibility to our young women to ensure that their education provides a full understanding and appreciation for the pioneering women that paved the way for the female leaders of today.

As the first Northern California Latina elected to the legislature in the past century, I must pay respect to the women who made it possible for me to hold elected office. In 1918 Anna Saylor, Esto Broughton, Elizabeth Hughes, and Grace Dorris became the first four women elected to the California Assembly. Saylor, who represented Alameda County, served in the Assembly until 1926. Broughton was the first female lawyer in Stanislaus County. Hughes, who represented Butte County, served in the Assembly until 1922. Dorris, shortly after taking office, introduced a resolution urging Congress to pass the Women's Suffrage Amendment.

It was Rose Ann Vuich who paved the way for the eleven women currently serving in the Senate. Vuich, a second generation Serbian-American from a farm town just outside Fresno, began her political career when she was chosen to replace the Democratic candidate who had withdrawn from the Senate race. Although many of her colleagues considered it a long shot, Vuich won the race, and became the first female elected to the Senate. Vuich served in the Senate for sixteen years, retiring in 1992.

These are just a few of the many trailblazing women throughout California history, and we cannot allow the accomplishments of these women to continue to be overlooked. Now more than ever, legislators, educators, and community leaders must combine our efforts to ensure that the names and stories of pioneering women throughout California are not forgotten.

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